

Book of the Month:

Books to Build Community

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Building Community Through Literacy

Dedication

To the children, teachers and parents of PS.6 who have come together through literacy and trust to build a community for all.

Rationale

This guide is an answer to the hundreds of visitors to PS.6 who always ask, “How do you choose your books?” “Why are the same books in Kindergarten as in Grade 5?” “How do you begin the dialogue toward community building?”

Principals and schools committees wishing to use literacy initiatives as vehicles for creating change can use this booklet as a guide for choosing books proven to be catalysts for change.

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Section 1: Introduction

“The stories of childhood leave an indelible impression, and their author always has riches in the temple of memory from which the image is never cast out to be thrown on the rubbish heap of things that are outgrown and outlived.”

Howard Pyle

Adults can also benefit from stories of childhood that leave indelible images and strong messages. When the adults are also parents and teachers, the message and impressions have a wide circle of influence.

Principal’s Choice began with one such book and author, a book that gave me as a new principal a “soft” way to convey a deep and powerful message. The message was that all students are to be treated with respect and dignity. *Chrysanthemum* and Kevin Henkes, its author, were just the vehicle to get that message across powerfully, succinctly and in a nonthreatening manner. When I read this book at the end of my first faculty conference in September, it was clear from the discussion that the staff understood that I felt that the first days of school were crucial to students and that their reception to school should be warm, positive and individualized.

All teachers received a copy of *Chrysanthemum* to read to their students on the first day of school to encourage classroom discussion about their feelings and fears. At the first PTA meeting, I once again read *Chrysanthemum* and asked parents to discuss their reactions to school experiences. Many asked to be kept abreast of books that conveyed especially powerful messages. Hence was born Principal’s Choice.

Books chosen to be distributed once a month under the Principal’s Choice banner always have strong messages and are accompanied by a letter explaining the reason for their selection. These books promote literacy not only by being well written and illustrated but also by offering possibilities for multiple interpretations. All the books chosen can be read in one sitting. The Book of the Month is read in every classroom within a stated time frame to provide siblings, teachers and specialists a common frame of reference for classroom discussion. Titles chosen each month are listed in the Parent Newsletter so that parents can also buy or borrow books for home discussion.

Above all, well-written books with strong messages tailored to each school’s needs help build a strong community. Our community used literacy as its foundation to recognize talents, celebrate diversity, acknowledge differences and discuss citizenship issues. More important, literacy brings human feelings into the classroom to empower us to change our actions, opinions and priorities.

Finally, as Carl Jung wrote

“One looks back with appreciation to the brilliant teachers, but with gratitude to those who touched our human feelings. The curriculum is so much necessary raw material, but warmth is the vital element for the growing plant and for the soul of the child.”

In the right hands, books have many of the answers to some of our more complex issues. Books can bring that warmth into the curriculum and nurture the soul of the child. A great book distributed simultaneously to a wide and varied audience can have an extraordinary impact.

Section 2: Program Procedures

This section offers suggestions for the selection, ordering and distribution of books and provides sample letters to teachers and parents.

Book Selection

Although each school has its own philosophy, special situations and critical issues, some messages are universal. It is helpful for principals and teachers to read publishers' catalogues that give extensive information about new books that might be worth purchasing. These catalogues are available from publishers and sometimes sent to school librarians. I also recommend monthly visits to bookstores with an extensive children's section to browse and reread the recommended titles.

Book Ordering

Books that have been around a while can usually be purchased with NYSTL funds. Recently published books can be purchased with library funds, OTPS, Imprest and if possible PTA funds. Ideally, one book for each classroom teacher should be ordered. If this is too costly, several books prominently displayed in a main office for school-wide borrowing will serve the same purpose. For maximum impact, books should be read within a two-week time frame.

Book Distribution

Books are personally distributed to each teacher on the same day. They should contain a message inside, ideally one written on a colorful paper with an attractive border.

Book Message

Each book chosen must convey a message that will touch the reader and build on an aspect of that school's goals and philosophy. The books should be accompanied by a message from the administrator or committee explaining why it was selected. The letter is crucial for the book to have special impact.

Sample Letters

Attached are some samples of letters I sent to my staff. You should clearly stress issues of concern in your particular building.

Sample Letter to Teachers

June 1997

Dear Teachers;

It is seldom that I find a book that totally says everything I wish to say at the end of the year. *Verdi*, however, is definitely the June 1997 Book of the Month.

Verdi has difficulty growing up and moving on, because he is used to the familiar. All of you are now in familiar surroundings, with familiar students and familiar expectations. You are experiencing a sense of loss at their leaving. This is normal and right. You have invested a lot of yourselves in these children, and you should miss them. However, the best aspect of teaching is that it is constantly changing, giving us opportunities to renew and reinvent ourselves/“our skins” every year.

In addition, as you probably know, our focus next year will be science. This book is rich in science information and also treats a topic that is often distasteful to adults in a very rich and exciting way. Snakes may actually become a popular topic of discussion after reading this book and being exposed to the wonderful illustrations. Science is exciting because it is real; it is surprising and it encourages inquiry.

A third message in this book is clearly that none of us can go it alone, that everyone needs the help and cooperation of the older, wiser and more experienced snakes. I think that truly addresses the very special metamorphosis that has taken place at our school, although we are people, not snakes.

Lastly, no book is truly valuable if it cannot stand by itself as a piece of literature.

“As *Verdi* listens to the first come alive” ...so I too listened to our school come alive in 1997.

“As *Verdi* blends so green” ...so too have you blended as a staff.

“With practice the three snakes preformed a perfect triple figure eight” ...with practice, we have performed a perfect 10!

Have a wonderful summer.

Sincerely,

Carmen

Sample Letter to Teachers

September 1997

Dear Teachers,

Welcome back to school!

I hope all of you had a relaxing, enjoyable vacation. It is palatable to feel the energy the first days of school. Everything is possible, everything is do-able, and our energies are focused on making the most productive year ever.

This is the year we're going to reach every child, praise more frequently, be more patient/tolerant. It's also the year we'll become more of a risk taker. In September, all things are possible.

Students also come to school with hope, expectations and a strong desire to make this the best year ever for themselves. This book, *Lilly's Purple Plastic Purse*, clearly demonstrates how one child's enthusiasm can be stroked or killed by a teacher's attitude. Won't you make a special effort this year not to prejudge any students, to treat all with respect and, to paraphrase Mr. Slinger, to use the motto: "Today was a difficult day. Tomorrow will be better."

Lilly's Purple Plastic Purse, which also has strong messages for students and parents, will be read aloud during the State of School Address. Let's create an atmosphere where every child will be valued and our strength will be in being teachers for all children.

Wishing you the best of all years,

Carmen

Letter to Parents

May 27, 1997

Dear Parents,

As you well know, next to people books are my favorite things, and here at PS.6 there is never such a thing as too many books. There is, however, the right book for the right occasion. This year our staff has spent many hours creating a specific book list to be read in each grade over the course of a year. Because this project was begun mid-year, many of the books have not been read, but we anticipate that next year our goal will be to have every student in every grade exposed to every book on the list for that specific grade.

To help us jump-start this National Standards Book List, we have designated our book fair Read-Discover the Past. The purpose of this theme is not only to read new books but also to reread old favorites so that we might fully understand that a good book with excellent characters is richer with a second reading and perhaps even a third. We have spent countless hours struggling to make these lists appropriate for the average reader as well as challenging for the above-average one. Most are meant to be read independently; however, several would benefit by being read aloud.

I urge you to make this summer the Summer of Reading as a Family while keeping in mind that this is not a contest with the highest number of books being the winner. This is a journey of discovery where you will all meet fascinating new characters and explore interesting topics. Please focus on your child's present grade list because that is its purpose. Reading ahead will actually spoil the adventure on which we are yet to embark. In addition, I would like to recommend four books that have been universally read to all our students in the last four weeks. Each of these books has a special message that will evoke strong emotions and hopefully thoughtful dialogue at home:

<i>Margaret, Frank, and Andy</i>	by Cynthia Rylant
<i>Could We Be Friends?</i>	by Bobbi Katz
<i>Pink and Say</i>	by Patricia Pilacco
<i>The Story of Ruby Bridges</i>	by Robert Coles

I wish all of you a wonderful summer and from a personal point of view can wish you nothing better than good weather, happy memories and wonderful reading.

Sincerely,

Carmen Fariña

Section 3: Sample Activities for School-Wide Use

This section discusses various school-wide activities for *Chrysanthemum* by Kevin Henkes (Greenwillow Books, 1991), which was chosen as a Book of the Month in 1991. This section also offers suggestions on parent involvement, classroom visits, buddy classes, aesthetic literacy, reading groups, bulletin board displays and ways of involving a school in a common author study that transcends age and reading ability.

Sample Book under Study

Chrysanthemum, by Kevin Henkes, is a bewitching story about a mouse who loved her name until the day she started her school. Once in school, the beauty of her name turns into a series of humiliating experiences until a sensitive teacher enters the classroom.

Letter to Teachers

September 1991

Dear Teachers,

As a new principal, I have searched for a book to begin our relationship together that will help bring a clear message to everyone about my educational philosophy.

Chrysanthemum is just that book. It succinctly makes the point that most students come to school ready to learn, eager to participate and anxious to succeed. It takes only one comment to convince a child that he or she is not welcome and to turn that child off to school.

By reading this book aloud the first week of school, children may articulate their fears about the school year both aloud and in writing (privately). It also reminds classmates, teachers and parents about children's vulnerability, especially in new situations.

For you as teachers, it really proclaims the power you have over your students and the necessity to use it wisely and carefully. Please make every effort to read, display and make this book and its message integral parts of your classroom work.

To all the Miss Delphinums of PS.6, have a successful school year!

Sincerely,
Carmen

Class Discussion Points

The following questions should trigger a lively classroom discussion:

- The expectation of the school from all perspectives (teachers, students, parents)
- How classmates need to be sensitive to all differences in their peers
- How parents handled this situation
- Victoria's reaction and role in the situation
- How the author may have come to develop this point of view

Writing Activities

The following are suggested writing activities for *Chrysanthemum*:

- Letters of advice to Chrysanthemum
- Letters to the teacher on how to rectify possible areas of classroom injustices
- Letters to classmates who may be unhappy

All Book of the Month activities should focus on the main message being conveyed and be a natural outgrowth of class discussion. You should allow this book to be reread independently by everyone. To keep the enjoyment fresh, avoid over-analysis.

Parent Involvement

As a home follow-up to school discussion, I recommend monthly messages to the parents about the Book of the Month. Encourage parents to borrow the book from the PTA office or the public library.

Classroom Visits

When visiting classrooms daily, the principal can focus on issues raised in the book to encourage dialogue and promote school-wide literacy initiatives.

Buddy Classes

Pairing upper grades with lower grades (K/ 5, 1/ 4, 2/ 3) promotes school-wide community. This pairing can revolve around curriculum issues and discussion of Book of the Month from a variety of perspectives.

Aesthetic Literacy

Because only picture books are chosen, some attention can be given to how art (illustration) promotes the message. The youngest students might want to analyze how color, pictures and photographs are used to convey messages; the older students can discuss how illustrations further move the story.

Reading Groups

Upper-grade students can be encouraged to develop reading groups around “critical discussion issues” rather than authors or genres. The Book of the Month can be used to motivate students to research more books on the same topic and role-play situations featured in the book. Likewise, students can also design posters highlighting positive behavior toward these issues.

Bulletin Board Displays

You might consider a bulletin board devoted to Principal’s Choice where different constituencies (students, parents, teachers) write their responses, suggestions and feedback. Because these will change every month or so, students, teachers and parents might begin to suggest books that might suit the Principal’s Choice theme. You can also ask students to write letters to teachers explaining their recommendations.

Author Study

The selection of *Chrysanthemum* as a Book of the Month can lead to a school-wide author study. Almost all authors have written additional books. Kevin Henkes, for example, always has a

strong point of view and a clear moral purpose. Each of his books encourages the reader to pursue self-examination about issues not usually dealt with in children’s literature. Students can be encouraged to develop an Attribute Chart (see below) to compare and contrast different books by the same author. Each school year begins with the same author. Students can then move on to different authors using the same mode.

Characters	Setting	Plot	Moral	Relevance to Life	Purposeful Action
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The Attribute Chart is an excellent way to involve a school in a common author study that transcends age and reading ability. This study can also be the initial starting point for developing standards in a specific reading area.

Other Books

Kevin Henkes has also written four other books: *Chester’s Way*, *Julius – The Baby of the World*, *Jessica*, and *Sheila Roe, The Brave*. Here is a synopsis of each of these books.

Chester’s Way discusses how a friendship for two can make room for a third person and possibly a fourth. This book stretches the definition of friendship and what makes for a good friend in a sensitive, funny way. This is a good book to read when a new student comes into the classroom.

Julius – The Baby of the World is the story of sibling rivalry told in a way all children can relate to. It tells of what can happen when a new baby is born and how “blood” is ultimately thicker than jealousy. This is a good book to read aloud when a student has just had a baby brother or sister in the family. It’s great to give a present to another sibling.

Jessica is the story of how a real best friend can be better than an imaginary one. This book celebrates imagination while stressing the value of real-life people.

Sheila Roe, The Brave is a short story that claiming to be the bravest isn’t always a sign of bravery. This is the story of how bravery depends on the situation. It’s a wonderful book for letting children know it’s fine to ask for help, even from one’s brother or sister.

Section 4: Book of the Month List

The following is a list of books with universal themes that can help create community through dialogue.

Wilma Unlimited: How Wilma Rudolph Became the World's Fattest Woman

Kathleen Krull (Harcourt Brace Co., 1996)

This is the story of Wilma Rudolph, who overcame physical and personal adversity to become celebrated as the fattest woman alive. This book, which allows teachers to emphasize that all talents must be honored in the classroom, will stimulate discussion on women athletes and on the Olympics as a showcase for patriotism. It will also help students who are talented in this area be appreciated.

R – During city-wide field track events and school field day competitions

Tar Beach

Faith Ringgold (Crown Publishers, 1991)

This book highlights the positive aspects of urban living and reaffirms that living in a city can lead to flights of fancy. The lyrical aspect of the writing can encourage an entire school to write about their common experiences and seeing their common community as a place to be valued.

R – To reaffirm New York City as a positive place to live and enjoy

The Story of Ruby Bridges

Robert Coles, illustrator – George Ford (Scholastic, 1995)

Ruby Bridges was the first black child to attend an all-white elementary school. This book, which is a true story of how one family's faith encouraged them to be part of American history, will provide a timely reminder that prejudice and ignorance must be fought not with violence but with courage and determination. This book is a vehicle to highlight discussion of specific areas of prejudice in the school building.

R –Black History Month and the October opening of Supreme Court

The Great Kapok Tree: Tale of Amazon Rain Forest

Lynn Cherry (Harcourt Brace & Co., 1990)

Chosen to be on the National Standards Booklist, this book stresses the importance of the rain forest in the human food chain. It has many interdisciplinary connections (science, art), but the focus on the interdependence between humans and nature is foremost.

R – prior to Science Fair

Old Henry

Joan W. Blas, illustrator Stephen Gammell (Mulberry Books, 1987)

This is a wise and witty book about different kinds of people learning to get along. This tale defines community as a diverse population learning to be tolerant of each other's habits and personal living styles. What counts is the person underneath, not how his or her property looks.

R – to emphasize acceptance of differences

De Colores and Other Latin American Folk Songs for Children

Jose-Luis Orozco, illustrator Elisa Klevin (Dutton, 1994)

Spanish tradition reveres the spoken word. It is much more common to have stories told or sung to a young child than to have a storybook read aloud. This book takes the best-known Spanish lullabies and translates them to English and illustrates them beautifully. This book can help bridge the gulf between the school specialist (music) and the classroom teacher by encouraging all faculty members to sing/speak the words of this songbook with their Spanish-speaking students.

R – Hispanic Heritage Month

Always My Dad

Sharon Dennis Wyethe (Apple Soup Book—Alfred Knopf, 1995)

Many children see their fathers only once in a while. This book, which reinforces the notion that love is displayed in many different ways, is timely and to be read prior to Father's Day celebrations to encourage discussion of what can be a very sensitive topic.

R – month of Father's Day

Alvin Ailey

Andrea David Pinkney (Hyperion Paperbacks for Children, New York, 1993)

This the story of Alvin Ailey, who changed the face of American dance forever by celebrating African-American traditions. The story also celebrates the power of dance as a way to express oneself and encourages the school community to honor artistic abilities.

R - during Dance Festival month

Pink and Say

Patricia Polacco (Philomel, 1994)

Setting: American Civil War. This book stresses the importance of oral literacy and tradition to both American history and personal history. The words in this book provide powerful topics for class discussion in areas of human relations, communication, true bravery.

R - anytime, to reinforce friendship

Willie Was Different

Norman Recoil (Norman Recoil Museum, 1994)

Norman Recoil's illustrations bring to life a story of true friendship and the difficulties of genius.

R - November, prior to parent-teacher conferences

All the Places to Love

Patricia MacLachlon (Harper Collins, 1994)

This book brings a special serenity into the classroom, especially during hectic times. Read this book during the last period on Friday to add a special dimension to your life. Several recurrent life themes—nature, family, childhood, sibling connections — are explored with beautiful, lyrical and personal real-life illustrations.

R - to create serenity during hectic times

Could We Be Friends? – Poems for Pals

Bobbi Katz, illustrator Joung Um Kim (Mondo, 1997)

The poetry featured in this book emphasizes cooperation, building community, appreciating differences, celebrating family and neighborhood. These poems are easy to read and digest and provide excellent models for children's writing. The multicultural nature of the illustrations gives all students a sense that this book "speaks" to them.

R - during Poetry Month celebration

The Children of China: An Artist's Journey

Song of Nan Zhang (Tundra, 1995)

This book explores Chinese ancestral roots, values, traditions and aesthetic practice. At a time when China is prime-time news coverage, it is essential for students to understand the symbolism and the history behind the world's largest country. The illustrations in this book make it easy for all ages to appreciate the messages. School-wide celebrations around a specific culture heighten awareness of this culture and bring the entire school community together.

R - month of Chinese New Year

Verdi

Janell Cannon (Harcourt, Brace & Co. 1997)

This book emphasizes science learning through a wonderful story of "growing up." It's an excellent book to open discussion about change both for teachers and for students.

R - an absolute must for June!

Miss Rumphius

Barbara Cooney (Penguin Books, 1982)

An ageless story about creating beauty everywhere by doing what you love best, this book explores the themes of cooperation, building of community and intergroup harmony.

R – beginning of spring to reawaken the need to create beauty within your own personal space.

Music and Drum

Laura Robb, illustrator Debra Lill (Philomel, 1997)

Devoted to anti-war poems, this book can stimulate excellent classroom dialogue about conflict resolution. The poems cover every imaginable war conflict and are easily transferable to present-day world/city situations.

R - good beginning point to discuss conflict resolution

I Wish I Were a Butterfly

James Howe, illustrator Ed Young (Voyager Books, 1987)

This book encourages one to believe in oneself through achievement, not through the eyes of others. Cooperation, self-esteem, interdependence are themes that are beautifully portrayed in this brightly illustrated book.

R – beginning of year book to encourage positive thinking.

Elisabeth

Clair A. Nivola (Frances Foster Books, 1997)

This is a story about lost childhood, the power of memory and how a doll can bridge the gulf between generations. Beautiful illustrations depict a true story based on the flight of Jews from Nazi Germany.

R - December or any other holiday time to stress the true importance of gift giving

All the Colors of Earth

Sheila Hamanaka (Morrow Junior Books, 1997)

This book tells in powerful verse the beauty of diversity. The illustrations help convey the message that the color of one's skin matches some glorious natural wonders.

R – a good book to encourage writing discussion of differences
and their special characteristics

Megan's Two Houses

Erica Jong, illustrator Freya Tang (Dove Kids, 1996)

This is a book that does not sugar-coat the agony children go through when parents divorce. This book is clearly told from the child's point of view and describes the conflict, attempts at assimilation and all the ramifications for parents and teachers. Valuable for school-wide discussion simultaneously to raise teacher awareness.

R - reading prior to parent-teacher conferences
All guidance counselors should have this book for discussions with parents/students.

Lilly's Purple Plastic Purse

Kevin Hindes (Greenwillow, 1996)

This is a story that speaks to every teacher, student and parent. Mr. Slinger is a teacher who understands differences, and Lilly is a student who needs to remember that each day is a different day. This book is wonderful for PTA meetings, as it has a strong message about parent advocacy.

R – Anytime of year. Great author study.

The True Story of the Three Little Pigs

Jan Scieszka, illustrator Lane Smith (Viking, 1989)

This is the first true multiple-perspective book, which tells the classic story through the wolf's eyes. It's an excellent invitation to classroom discussions on point of view and history from many sides. The best of its kind.

R – to encourage teachers to teach history from a variety of perspectives and to hold
classroom discussion from perspectives other than their own

Amazing Grace

Mary Hoffman, illustrator Caroline Beach (Dial, 1991)

This is a story emphasizing that you can be anything you want to be if you want it badly enough to work for it. This book encourages discussion on how race, gender and other physical differences play a role in our school, our home and our society. This book should stimulate discussions on gender equity when dealing with lunchtime activities.

R – Anytime, but should initiate school-wide discussion on
the role gender plays in school-wide decision making

Talking Walls

Margy Burns Knight, illustrator Anne Sibley O'Brien (Tilbury House, 1992)

This book cannot be read at one sitting but needs to be read over a period of time. It introduces children to different cultures by exploring the walls around the world and showing how they unify/separate people in different places. Students should be encouraged to discuss their own walls and stories they tell. They decide whether they should separate or unify participants.

R - great to introduce school-wide art project on "Talking Walls"

When I Was Little: A Four-Year-Old's Memoir of Her Youth

Janice Lee Curtis, illustrator, Laura Cornell (Harper Collins, 1993)

This is a delightful book that reinforces the notion that we learn something at every stage of our lives. Every grade can use this book to emphasize appropriate developments at that age. The book not only encourages discussion on family, dreams, academic achievements but also reminds us that no one comes to school completely finished.

R – Anytime
